The Wreckers

By FRANCIS LYNDE

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CHAPTER XV—Continued.

—13—

"But you said you had forgotten her name!"

"So I have—her married name. And what's more, I mean to keep on forgetting it."

There was no mistake about the boss' frown this time.

"That won't do, Upton," he said, kind of warningly.

"It will do well enough for the present. I'd marry her tomorrow, Graham, if she were free, and there were no other obstacles. Unhappily, there are two—besides the small legal difficulty; she doesn't care for my money—having a little of her own; and she happens to be in love with the other fellow."

I guess the boss was remembering what Mrs. Sheila had told him in that confidence before the back-parlor fire, about its being all off between her and Collingwood, for he said: "I think you are mistaken as to that last."

"No, I'm not mistaken. But that's neither here nor there. Neither you nor I can send Collingwood to the penitentiary—that's a cinch. Wherefore, I'm advising you to quit, walk out, jump the job."

At that the boss took a fresh brace, righting his swing chair with a snap.

"You know very little about me, Upton, if you think I'm going to throw up my hands now, when the real pinch has come. I have a scheme—if it could only be worked. But it can't be worked on a rising market. By some trick or other, the Dunton people are boosting the stock again. It went up three points yesterday."

Mr. Van Britt grinned. "They're discounting the effect of this little political deal—which will at least rope your reform scheme down, if it doesn't do anything else. What you need is a good, old-fashioned cataclysm of some sort; something that would fairly knock the tar out of P. S. L. securities and send them skittering down the toboggan slide in spite of anything Uncle Breckenridge could do to stop them; down to where they could be safely and profitably picked up by the dear public. Unfortunately, those things don't happen outside of the story books. If they did, if the earthquake should happen along our way just now, I don't know but I'd be disloyal enough to get out and help it shake things up a bit."

After Mr. Van Britt had gone, the boss put in the remainder of the day like a workingman, skipping the noon luncheon as he sometimes did when the work drive was extra heavy. Meanwhile, as you'd suppose, rumor was plentifully busy, on the railroad, and also in town.

By noon it was well understood that there had been a radical change in the management of C. S. & W., and that there was going to be a general strike in answer to the slashing cut in wages. I slipped up-town to get a bite, and I heard some of the talk. It was pretty straight, most of it—which shows how useless it is to try to keep any business secrets, nowadays.

For example: the three men at my table in the Bullard grill-room—they didn't know me or who I was—knew that a council of war had been called in the railroad headquarters, and that Ripley had been pulled in by wire from Lesterburg, and that we were rushing along hurriedly to provide storage room for the wheat shippers in case of a tie-up, and that we were arranging to distribute railroad company coal in case the tie-up should bring on a fuel famine—knew all these things and talked about them.

They were facts, as far as they went—these things. The boss hadn't been idle during the forenoon, and he kept up the drive straight through to quitting time. Word was brought in during the afternoon by Tarbell that the Hatch people were wiring the Kansas City and Omaha employment agencies and placing hurry orders for strike-breakers. The boss' answer to this was a peremptory wire to our passenger agents at both points to make no rate concessions whatever, of any kind, for the transportation of laborers under contract. It was a shrewd little knock. Labor of that kind is mighty hard to move unless it can get free transportation or a low rate of fare, and I could see that Mr. Norcross was hoping to keep the strike-breakers away.

When six o'clock came, the boss asked May to stay and keep the office open while I could go down-stairs and get my dinner in the station restaurant, and he went off up-town—to the club, I suppose. After I'd had my bite, I let May go. Everything was moving all right, so far as anybody could see. We had five extra fuel trains loading at the company's chutes at Coalville, and the dispatcher was instructed to work them out on the line during the night, distributing them to the towns that had reported shortages. They were not to be turned over to the regular coal yards; they were to be side-tracked and held for emergencies.

Mr. Norcross came back about eight o'clock, and I gave him my report of how things were going on the line. A little later Mr. Cantrell dropped in, and there was a quiet talk about the situation, and what it was likely to develop. The Mountaineer editor was given all the facts, except the one big one about Hatch's death-grip on us, and in turn Mr. Cantrell promised the help of his paper to the last ditch—though, of course, he had no idea of how deep that last ditch was going to be. I had a lot of filing and indexing to do, and I kept at work while they were talking, wondering all the time if the boss would venture to tell the editor about the depth of that "last ditch." He didn't. I guess he thought he wouldn't until he had to.

It was pretty nearly nine o'clock when the editor went away, and Mr. Norcross was just saying to me that he guessed we'd better knock off for the night, when we both heard a step in May's room. A second later the door was pushed open and a man came in, making for the nearest chair and flinging himself into it as if he'd reached the limit. It was Collingwood. He was chewing on a dead cigar and his face was like the face of a corpse. But he was sober.

Naturally, I supposed he had come to make trouble with the boss on Mrs. Sheila's account, and I quietly edged open the drawer of my desk where I kept Fred May's automatic, so as to be ready. He didn't waste much time.

"I saw you as I was coming away from Kendrick's last night," he began, with a bickering rasp in his voice. "Did you go up against the gun I had loaded for you?"

Mr. Norcross cut straight through to the bottom of that little complication at a single stroke.

"What Mrs. Collingwood said to me, or what I said to her, can have no possible bearing upon anything that you may have to say to me, or that I can consent to listen to, Mr. Collingwood."

The derelict sat up in his chair.

"But you've got to keep hands off, just the same; at Kendrick's, and in this other business, too. If you don't, there is going to be blood on the moon! Get me?"

The boss never batted an eye. "I'm taking it for granted that you are sober, Mr. Collingwood," he said. "If you are, you must surely know that threats are about the poorest possible weapons you can use just now."

"It's a plant, from start to finish!" gritted the man in the chair. "I haven't done a d—d thing more than to cash a few checks for—for expenses, and turn the money over to Bullock. Now Hatch tells me that I was working with a spotter—his spotter—and that he can send me up for bribery. It's a lie. I don't know what Bullock did with the money, and I don't want to know."

"But you had orders to give it to him when he required it, didn't you?" Mr. Norcross cut in.

"That's none of your business. I want you to choke this man Hatch off of me!"

The boss had picked up his paper-knife. "I don't know why you should come to me for help," he said. "You have been hand-in-glove with these conspirators ever since you came out here. Two days ago you knew that they had set a trap for my special train on the Strathcona branch—a trap that was meant to kill me."

It was a random shot, and I knew that Mr. Norcross was just guessing

"Why Shouldn't I Want to See You Killed?"

at where it might land when he fired it. But it went home; oh, you bet it went home!

"D—n you!" gurgled the bounder, half starting to his feet. "Why shouldn't I want to see you killed? Haven't you done enough to me?"

"No!" the word was slammed at him like a bullet. And then: "As I told you in the beginning, we won't go into any phase of it that involves Mrs. Collingwood. Get back into your own boat. Are you trying to tell me now that Hatch is threatening you?"

"He's played me for a come-on. He says he's got the whole business down in black and white, with affidavits, and all that. He had the nerve to tell me less than an hour ago that he'd burn me alive if I didn't toe the mark."

"What does he want you to do?"

"He wants me to stick around here so that he can use me against you. He knows how you're mixed up with Sheila and that you can't turn a wheel without making it look as if you were going after me on your own personal account."

There was silence for a little time. It was an awful muddle, with bloody murder sticking out of it on every side.

"If you have come here with the idea that I can force Hatch's hand, you are very much misled," said the boss at the close of the electric pause. And then: "Has he made it appear to you that he was merely trying to help you avenge your own fancied wrongs?"

"He said I ought to get you; that any man who would make love to a married woman ought to be got."

My chief was looking past the derelict and out through the darkened window.

"You don't know me, Mr. Collingwood, but you do know your wife; and you know that she is as far above suspicion as the angels in heaven. Let that part of it go. Hatch was merely using you for his own ends. If he could persuade you to kill me off out of the way, it would be merely that much gained in the business fight. You haven't done it thus far, and now he is using your check-cashing excursion as a club with which he proposes to brain the entire railroad management, your uncle included, if we interfere with his plans."

Collingwood scowled up at the ceiling, shifting the dead cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"So that's the way of it, is it?" he commented. "He was working for his own pocket all the time, and Uncle Breck stands pat and slips him the ace he was needing to make his hand a winner. Between you and me, Norcross, I believe this d—d piker needs killing a few times, himself."

The boss sat back in his swing chair and I could just imagine that he was trying to get some sort of proper angle on this young fellow who, in addition to his other scoundrelisms, big and little, had wrecked the life of Sheila Macrae. I knew what he was thinking. He had a theory that no man that was ever born was either all angel or all devil, and he was hunting for the redeeming streak in this one.

When you looked right hard at the haggard face you could see something sort of half-appealing in it; something to make you think that perhaps, away back yonder before the spoiling began, there used to be a man; never a strong man, I guess, but one that might have been generous and free-hearted, maybe. I got a fleeting little glimpse of that back-number man when he turned suddenly and said:

"One night a few weeks ago when I was full up, Hatch got hold of me and told me you were out at the Kendrick place with Sheila. He made me believe that I ought to go out there and kill you, and I started to do it. Do you know why I didn't do it?"

"No," said the chief, mighty quietly.

"Well, I'll tell you. One night last spring up at the Bullard you slammed me one in the face and dragged me off to my room to keep me from making a bigger ass of myself than I'd already made. I haven't forgotten that. In all these crooked years, nobody else has even taken the trouble to chuck me decently out of sight and give me a chance to brace. Drunk as I was, I remembered it that night when I was climbing up to a window in the major's house and trying to get a shot at you."

Mr. Norcross shook his head, more than half sympathetically, I thought.

"Let that part of it go and tell me about this other trouble," he said. "How badly are you tangled up in this political business?"

"I've given it to you straight on the bribing proposition. Uncle Breck used me as a money carrier because—well, maybe it was because he couldn't trust Bullock. I didn't know definitely what Bullock was doing with the checks I cashed for him, though I supposed, of course, it was something that wouldn't stand daylight. It was only a side issue with me. I was coming out here anyway. I knew Sheila had made up her mind—God knows she's had cause enough; but I had a crazy notion that I'd like to be on the same side of the earth with her again for just a little while. Then this—" he trailed off in a babble of maledictions poured out upon the man who had trapped him and used him.

The boss straightened himself in his chair, but he still was speaking gently when he said:

"You are not asking my advice, and I don't owe you anything, personally, Mr. Collingwood. But I'll say to you what I might say to a better man in like circumstances. You have done all the harm you can, but, as I see it, there doesn't seem to be any need of your staying here to suffer the consequences. Why don't you go back to New York, taking your wife with you, if she will go?"

Collingwood's smile was a mere teeth-baring grimace.

"Sheila made her wedding journey with me once, when she was just eighteen. The next time she rides with me it will be at my funeral. Oh, I've earned it, and I'm not kicking. And about this other thing: I can't duck. You know what Hatch is holding me for. He told me just a little while ago that if I stepped aboard of a train, I'd be arrested before the train could pull out."

It was a handsome little precaution on the part of the chief of the grafters. If a fight should be precipitated—if the boss should try to checkmate the C. S. & W. gobble—the arrest and indictment of President Dunton's nephew would serve bully good and well as a dramatic bit of side play to keep the newspapers from printing too much about the other thing.

"If you really want to go, I think it can be arranged in some way, in spite of Hatch and his bluffing," Mr. Norcross put in quietly. "So far as our railroad troubles are concerned it will neither help nor hinder for you to stay on here, now."

As if the helpful suggestion had been a lighted match to fire a hidden mine of rage, Collingwood sprang to his feet with his dull eyes ablaze.

"No, by God!" he swore. "I'm going to make him come across with those affidavit papers first! You wait right here, Norcross. You think I'm all cur, but I'll show you. There isn't much left of me but hound dog, but even a hound dog will bite if you kick him hard enough. Lend me a gun, if you've got one and I'll——"

"Hold on—none of that!" the boss broke in sternly, jumping out of his chair to enforce the command. But before he could make the grabbing move the corridor door slammed noisily and the madman was gone.

CHAPTER XVI

The Deserter

Mr. Norcross chased out and tried to overtake Collingwood, going as far as the foot of the stairs. I went, too, but got only far enough to meet the boss coming up again. There was nothing doing. The station policeman had seen the crazy rounder jump into a taxi and go spinning off up-town.

There was another jolt waiting for us when we got back to the office. While we were both out, Mr. Van Britt had blown in from his room at the foot of the hall and we found him lounging comfortably in the chair that Collingwood had just vacated.

"I thought maybe you'd turn up again pretty soon, since you'd left the doors all open," was the way he started out. Then: "Sit down, Graham; I want to talk a few lines."

Mr. Norcross took his own chair and twirled it to face the general superintendent. "Say it," he commanded briefly.

Mr. Van Britt hooked his thumbs in his armholes.

"I've just been figuring a bit on the general outlook: you have a decently efficient operating outfit here, what with Perkins and Brant and Conway handling the three divisions as self-contained units. You don't need a general superintendent any more than a monkey needs two tails."

"What are you driving at?" was the curt demand.

"Well, suppose we say retrenchment, for one thing. As I size it up, you might just as well be saving my salary. It would buy a good many new crossties in the course of a year."

"That's all bunk, and you know it," snapped the boss. "The organization as it stands hasn't a single stick of dead wood in it. You know very well that a railroad the size of the Short Line can't run without an individual head of the operating department."

Mr. Van Britt laughed a little at that.

"If you should get some one of these new efficiency experts out here he would probably tell you that you could cut your staff right in two in the middle."

I could see that the boss was getting mighty nearly impatient.

"You are merely turning handsprings around the edges of the thing you have come to say, Upton," he barked out. "Come to the point, can't you? What have you got up your sleeve?"

"Nothing that I could make you understand in a month of Sundays. I'm sore on my job and I want to quit."

"Nonsense! You don't mean that?"

"Yes, I do. I'm tired of wearing the brass collar of a soulless corporation. What's the use, anyway? I found a bunch of dividend checks from my bank at home in the mail to-day, and what good does the money do me? I can't spend it out here; can't even tip the servants at the hotel without everlastingly demoralizing them. I'm like the little boy who wanted to go out in the garden and eat worms."

The boss was frowning thoughtfully.

"You're not giving me a show, Upton," he protested. "Can't you blow the froth off and let me see what's in the bottom of the stein?"

"Pledge you my word, it's all froth, Graham. I want to climb up on the mesa behind the shops and take a good deep breath of free air and shake my fist at your blamed old cow-track of a railroad and tell it to go to the devil. You shouldn't deny me a little pleasure like that."

It was getting under the boss' skin at last. "I can't believe that you really want to resign," he broke out sort of hopelessly. "It's simply preposterous!"

"Pull it down out of the future and put it in the present, and you've got it," said Mr. Van Britt. "I have resigned. I wrote it out on a piece of paper and dropped it into your mail box as I came through the outer office. It's signed, sealed, and delivered. You'll give me a testimonial, or something of that sort, 'To Whom It May Concern,' won't you? I've been obedient and faithful and honest and efficient, and all that, haven't I?"

"I'd like to know where you got your liquor, Upton. That is the most charitable construction I can put upon all this. Why, man alive! you're quitting me in the thick of the toughest fight the grafters have put up!"

"Yes, I know; but a man's got only one life to live, and I've always had a sneaking sympathy for the high private in the front rank who didn't want to stand up and get himself shot full of holes. I'm running, and if you should ask me why, I'd tell you what the retreating soldier told Stonewall Jackson; he said he was running only because he couldn't fly." Once more the boss grew silently thoughtful. Out of the digging mental inquiry he brought this:

"Has this sudden notion of yours anything to do with Sheila Macrae, Upton?"

"Pledge you my word again. I met Sheila on the street today and promised her that I wouldn't so much as tip my hat to her while Collingwood is on this side of the Missouri river."

Handing in a Thick Bunch of Telegrams for Transmission.

"But if you quit, you'll go east yourself, won't you?"

"Maybe, after a while. For the time being, I'd like to loaf on you for a week or so and watch the wheels go around without my having to prod them. It's running in my mind that this newest phase of the C. S. & W. business is going to stir up a mighty pretty shindy, and I had a foolish notion that I'd like to stick around and look on—as an innocent bystander."

"The innocent bystander usually gets shot in the leg," the boss ripped out, with the brittlest kind of humor. And then: "I suppose I shall have to let you do what you want to—and let you pick your own time for giving me the real reason. But you're crippling me most savagely, Upton—and at a time when I am least able to stand it."

Mr. Van Britt got up and edged his way toward the door.

"It's a good reason, Graham; and some time—say when we are walking through the pearly gates of the New Jerusalem together—maybe I'll tell you about it. If I were really a good scrapper, I'd stay and help you fight it out with Hatch; but you know the old saying—capital is always cowardly; and my present credit at the Portal City National is pretty well up to a quarter of a million, thanks to the dividends I deposited today. Good-night. I'll see you in the morning—if by that time you haven't decided to cut me cold."

I kept right busy over the indexes after Mr. Van Britt went away, just to give the boss a little chance to catch up with himself. He sure was catching it hot and heavy on all sides. All we needed now was for President Dunton to come smashing in with one more good jolt and it would be all over but the obsequies, the monument and the epitaph. At least, that is the way it looked to me.

It was along about ten o'clock when the boss closed his desk with a bang and said we'd better saw it off for the night. I walked up-town with him and as we were passing the Bullard he turned in to ask the night clerk if Collingwood was in his room. The answer was nix; that the young New Yorker hadn't been seen since dinner.

On the way out we saw Mr. Van Britt at the telegraph alcove. He was handing in a thick bunch of telegrams for transmission, and he rather pointedly turned the sheaf face down upon the marble slab when we came along, as much as to say "it's none of your business what I'm doing."

It struck me as sort of curious that he should have so much wire correspondence when he claimed to be taking a rest, and why he was so careful not to let us get a glimpse of what it was all about. But the whole thing was now so horribly muddled that a little mystery more or less on anybody's part couldn't make much difference; and that was the thought I took to bed with me a little later after we reached our rooms in the railroad club.

CHAPTER XVII

The Beginning of the End

However much the Hatch people may have wanted to avoid publicity regarding the change of ownership and policies in the Storage & Warehouse reorganization, the prompt announcement of a general strike of the employees was enough to make every newspaper in the state sit up and take notice.

We had the Mountaineer at the breakfast-table in the club grill-room on the morning of the day when the strike was advertised to go into effect. There was a news story, with big headlines in red ink, and also an editorial. Cantrell didn't say anything against the railroad company. His comments were those of an observer who wished to be straight-forward and fair to all concerned, but his editorial did not spare the silly local stockholders whose swapping and selling had made the coup possible.

Cantrell, himself, mild-eyed and looking as if he'd got out of bed about three hours too early, drifted into the grill-room and took a seat at our table before we were through.

"I wanted to be decent about it, Norcross," he said, forestalling anything that the boss might be going to say about the editorial in the Mountaineer. "I'm trying to believe that the men higher up in your railroad councils haven't fathered this Hatch scheme of consolidation—which is more than some of the other pencil-pushers will do for you, I'm afraid. Thanks to your publicity measures, everybody believes that you still hold the whip-hand over the combination with your ground leases. I'm not asking what you propose to do; I am merely taking it for granted that you are going to stick to your policy, and hoping that you will come and tell me about it when you are ready to talk."

"I shall do just that," the boss promised; and I guess he would have been glad to let the matter drop at this, only Cantrell wouldn't.

"I lost three good hours' sleep this morning on the chance of catching you here at table," the editor went on. "A little whisper leaked in over the wires last night, or, rather, early this morning, that set me to thinking. You haven't been having any trouble with your own employees lately, have you, Norcross?"

"Not a bit in the world. Why?"

"There is some little excitement, with the public taking a hand in it. There were indignation meetings held last night in a number of the towns along your lines, and resolutions were passed protesting against the action of the new combination in cutting wages, and asserting that public sentiment would be with the C. S. & W. employees if they are forced to carry out their threat of striking at noon today. The whisper that I spoke of intimated that the protest might extend to the railroad employees."

"There's nothing in it," said the boss decisively. "I suppose you mean in the way of a sympathetic strike, and that is entirely improbable. I imagine very few of the C. S. & W. employees belong to any of the labor unions."

"A strike on the railroad would hit you pretty hard just now, wouldn't it?" Cantrell asked.

Mr. Norcross dodged the question. "We're not going to have a strike," he averred; and since we had finished our breakfast, he made a business excuse and we slid out.

When we reached the office we found Mr. Van Britt on hand, reading the morning paper.

"You don't get around as early as you might," was the little millionaire's comment when the boss walked in and opened up his desk. "I've been waiting nearly a half-hour for you to show up. Seen the papers?"

The boss nodded.

"I don't mean the strike business; I mean the market quotations."

"No; I didn't look at them."

"They are interesting. P. S. L. Common went up another three points yesterday. It closed at 38 and a fraction. You know what that means, Graham. It means that Uncle Breckenridge and his crowd are already joyfully discounting your coming resignation. Somebody has given them a wire tip that you are as good as down and out, and unless a miracle of some sort can be pulled off, I guess the tip is a straight one. Strong as he is, Chadwick can't carry you alone."

"Drop it," snapped the boss irritably. And then: "Have you come to tell me that you have reconsidered that fool letter you wrote me last night?"

"Not in a million years," returned the escaped captive airily. "I am here this morning as a paying patron of the Pioneer Short Line. I want to hire a special train to go—well, anywhere I please on your jerkwater railroad. The Eight-Fifteen will do, with Buck Chandler to run it."

"Pshaw! take your own car and any crew you please. We are not selling transportation to you."

"Yes, you are; I'm going to pay for that train, and what's more, I want your written receipt for the money. I need it in my business. Then, if Chandler should happen to get gay and dump me into the ditch somewhere, I can sue you for damages."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Got a Scare.

"What ails the poetess?" "She went looking for the first robin of springtime and saw the first snake."